

Three great ways to open a workshop

The “ice breaker” is a mainstay of workshops, seminars, and team-building exercises. Trust us: they aren’t all silly.

Good ice breakers will not only start people on the process of getting to know each other, but also introduce the topic of the event in a fun and interesting way. If participants already know each other, ice breakers can be used to move conversations into new and unexplored territories.

Some ice breakers are “just for fun.” Although I do like to have fun, the pragmatist in me wants there to be a reason beyond having fun if I’m to do something at a work-related session. I believe that it’s activities like the “just for fun” ice breakers that cause people to quickly label a session “touchy-feely” and use that as an excuse to buy out of the whole process from the beginning. That being said, many others find these a useful way to start an event out on a light-hearted note. Examples of this type of icebreaker are:

1. Top Fives: Have people pair up with someone they don’t know and share their top five lists of anything—books, movies, desserts, vacation spots, etc... If time, they can share why these things are their favorites. I find that giving participants a silent minute to think first, helps participants get to the meat of the matter faster.

2. Ten Things: Have folks divide into groups of four or five. Ask them to find 10 things they all have in common. These things cannot be items we all share as human beings (same body parts, we all need to eat, sleep, wear clothes for protection, etc...) This one takes a bit more time—allow 10-15 minutes for this discussion. At the end of the time, have someone from each small group share out in the large group.

3. Speed Introductions: Have people break into pairs. They must tell each other their name, their job title, one thing they love to do on their free time and one thing that’s on their bucket list. Afterwards, pairs introduce one another to the whole group.

Other ice breakers are segues into the work at hand or are actually based on the purpose of the session. These ice breakers serve the purpose of getting to know the folks in the room, while also preparing their brains for the task ahead. Many ice breakers can be tweaked to move participants in this direction. For example, we can do this with the above ice breakers, just by changing the prompts:

1. Top Fives: Use a prompt such as this one, “What are the five most powerful learning experiences you had between the ages of 6 and 16?”



Icebreaker Sisu, by HugoVK,
<http://flic.kr/p/dUN4eo>

2. Ten Things: “What ten changes/improvements to the education system would all of you make?”

3. Speed Introductions: Along with sharing their names and job titles, ask participants to share one goal they have for the upcoming day and one concern they have around doing this work.

When beginning a 5-Day New Coaches CFG training, I must admit, I do have my favorites. Here are my top three:

A. Quotes Introduction Activity: This activity calls for participants to choose a quote from the [quotes cards](#) around education that is particularly meaningful to that participant. The quotes are varied and from many different sources, allowing participants to pick text that most closely articulates what they feel to be true about education.

This allows a particularly deep and meaningful professional conversation to happen between two people who don’t know each other. It also sets up the training well—participants are now eager to further interact with their colleagues on this level.

B. Education Metaphors: This ice breaker uses the creative power of a metaphor to unlock participants’ perceptions of themselves when they are doing their best work and the weaknesses that might be associated with those strengths. Talking to someone you don’t know well about what inspires/guides you in your work as a professional and what weakness you might have encourages feelings of bonding and trust. It’s a great way to start 5 days of hard work together.

C. Education Pennies: This activity is a good one to use with people who have known each other a long time. Interesting things arise when participants are asked to dredge through their memories to come up with a powerful learning experience they’ve had during their penny’s year!

NSRF is now in the process of rewriting and creating more activities, including ice breakers, for our members. Join our membership and visit our website regularly to see the new activities and protocols we add every month!



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